

The Sacred Body


An Honors Thesis (AFA 489)

by

Nicholas Jones

Thesis Advisor

Hannah Barnes



5/1/2012

**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

May, 2012

Expected Date of Graduation

May, 2012

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Abstract

The development of modern art over the past century has been towards a greater emphasis of the artist's gesture as integral to the meaning of a piece of art. The primacy of action, and hence, the body, to the artistic process provided the precursor to the birth of performance art in the 1970's. In the body of work I created, titled *The Sacred Body*, I peel back the various elements and constructs surrounding the art object to arrive at constructions that vacillate between action and object, noun and verb, presence and absence. Through the pieces I correlate the intentions of diverse groups and artists such as the Gutai Group, Yves Klein, Robert Ryman, and others.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Hannah Barnes for her advice and support throughout this project and my entire time as an undergraduate at Ball State University.

I would like to thank Professor Jacinda Russell for introducing me to Yves Klein, without whom this project would not have developed as it had.

I would like to thank the painting faculty as a whole for their support of my experimentation and strange ideas.

The Sacred Body

Nicholas Jones
December 2010

Project Mentor: Hannah Barnes

This thesis completed in partial fulfillment of a
Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Painting.

Department of Art - Ball State University

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Nick Jones
765.606.5585
waucgods@gmail.com

Education	BFA, majors in painting and visual communication, minor in French. Expected date of graduation, May 2012, Ball State University.
Exhibitions/Performances	2010 Selected Works of the BSU Painting Dept. 2010 Selected Works of Drawing 2010 My footfalls are heavy, my being is light 2010 The Body Photographic 2011 The Student Center Student Show 2011 Monkey Thunder 2011 Rite and Ritual 2011 Beautiful Abstractions to Sublime Utility 2011 Illicit Explicit 2011 The Wiles Space 2011 Selected Works of BSU Video Art 2011 A Senior and Graduate Review 2011 Double Visions 2011 BFA Thesis Exhibition 2012 Art is Free
Bibliography	Interview with Alberto Pimienta. Newslink Indiana April 12, 2010.
Employment	Internship with the Ball State Department of Theatre and Dance: 2010-2012 Ball State summer paint crew: June 2010 - August 2010
Activities	Fine Arts League: 2010-2012 AIGA, the Professional Association for Design: 2010-2012 Urban Gaming League: 2008-2011 Charlie's Angel's (an on campus a cappella group): 2009-2010 RHA (Residence Hall Association): 2009

Between stillness and motion there is only self.

There is no difference between the personal and the universal.

Size means nothing, neither does scale.

We are constantly shifting and changing.

Since the world is made of people, it too is constantly in flux.

Flux is stillness.

People are not prone to growth.

Growth is willful action.

Change does not equal growth.

More does not equal growth.

When anything grows, it begins at the most basic level possible.

We are currently defined by the image.

Art is the discipline governing the image.

Art is willful action.

To grow, we must instead define the image, not be defined by it.

To grow, Art must instead define the image, not be defined by it.

To define is to transcend.

To transcend is to move toward unity.

All things microscopic and macroscopic are unified by motion.

Art must first understand motion.

Motion transcends all.

Growth is motion.

Wonder

I want them to discover that they are artists; everyone is an artist, a creator, and a refiner of sensibility.

–Yves Klein, taken from *Yves Klein: with the void, full powers*

We are miraculous. We are a complex of systems stacked upon each other, a strange tangle of functions and needs. Each day we become a thousand rivers as drops of blood rush through our veins. Our breaths feed into the great winds and storms of the world. We see, and our eyes literally reflect the light of stars. I am helpless but to wonder at us.

Wonder is one of the essential powers of humanity. It is our glorifying virtue. For me, it is an essential operation. By our birthright of having a mind we are imbued with this capacity to wonder. To wonder is to speculate, to ponder, and to imagine. The act of wondering constitutes an interrogation of the potentiality inherent in the universe. Wonder is the engine of the fantastical realization. However, wonder is also a quality. The wondrous touches upon the magnitude of our existence and the magnitude of the universe. It is an ascendant quality of the body. What else could encapsulate its function and form? Wonder is a powerful tool for the artist and scientist, for it liberates and elevates the mind. It offers discovery unfettered by outside constraints.

I believe that the principle drive behind my artistic output is investigation, and the mode of that investigation is wonder. This plays into why I believe the body is such an important starting point for the artistic process. The artist already has a powerful dynamo of inspiration with him or her at all times, and as that source of creative energy is utilized we find that it can drive not just artistic output but cultural development as well. Or, I see artistic output as cultural development.

Contemporary culture is largely a realm of sedate comfort. Sensations and phenomena are pushed upon us. Our passivity is encouraged. Debord extrapolates in *The Society of the Spectacle* that the modern social engine has grown to the point that not only has our time as workers plugged into that system been structured to contain us, but our time outside of that system has been engineered to foster our complicity with and approval of that system, our “free time.” We are just as required to produce for society as we are to consume (Debord 2002).

I see the entirety of artistic production as standing in opposition to this. The very fact of me producing culture in a piece of art and releasing it to the larger community for engagement is one of the most subversive acts possible, for in doing so I stop operating within the prescripts of the social engine. Unlike many activities society promotes, art is dangerously selfish; it is selfish in its agenda. Art has the capacity to pursue whatever it wishes in spite of society. Call art the necessary heresy of the individual against society.

The modern condition is also defined by overpowering homogeny. As a byproduct of capitalistic interaction our desires, our beliefs, our fears, and even the basic appearance of our bodies are transmogrified to suit the aims of the economic engine. This trend even insinuates itself into the art community. People develop a “style,” and artists are encouraged to make certain kinds of work for the diabolical reason that it sells well. The institutions that promote art and artists have to consider the potential trendiness of work to ensure their fiscal solvency. The wonderful does not assure income so much as the known quantity. And from this flows stagnation.

My work opposes this by intentionally employing heterodoxy. My studio practice is not defined by one mode of production. I am not a painter, a performance artist, a poet, or any other specialization. I am simply an artist. Thank God. Although I see the value in creating a coherent idea in a body of work (as I have done for this exhibition) and achieving coherency in the display of that work, I aim to make sure that no one exhibition can contain the plurality of my artistic output. I will not be defined by one visual style. What homogeny there is in my being and my art is an ethereal desire: the impulse to ask questions.

I am not interested in the content of a given topic so much as the contingencies that underpin that topic. The assumptions that go into our understanding of grand social narratives such as religion, truth, spirituality, sexuality, and art are the cracks in the otherwise perfect shell of a convenient societal notion. I will pulverize that shell. By pulling apart the falseness of given premises viewed as necessary or fundamental, I expose the greater truths those conditions of the institution or idea were obscuring.

In *The Sacred Body* the beginning questions for me involved the art-making process itself. What is required to make a painting? When or where does that vital kernel pass from the artist to the materials to transform it into art? I stripped away components of my projects, one by one, until I found myself doing watercolor bands stacked on top of each other. I hesitated at that place, delighted in the transparencies of the watercolor washes and the loveliness of their colors interacting with paper. Then finally color evaporated too, stranded as I dug deeper into my artistic process. I found myself working with just my body, paper, and water. And between myself and matter I found art.

Some may try and insinuate that the dangerous enemy of art is science, believing that its strict formation of rules drawn from observation to be the negation of art. This is false; it is one of the great lies fed to us. The opposition of art is the same as that which is the opposition of science: apathy. Grotesque, decadent, inert apathy. Art constitutes a critical engagement with the world. It thrives on the cyclical engine of artist, art object, and response. Both science and art probe the universe at a fundamental level. Science structures our understanding of matter. Art structures our interaction with that matter. They investigate areas most would rather be left alone. They upturn paradigms. Through their respective practices they unearth the conditions of our existence.

Apathy is the mark of the sheep and the receptacle. Drunk with

stimulation, most people are not just content but gloriously satiated by the depersonalized, denatured, and sterile artifacts of our society. Sensational excess comes spewing out of televisions, iPods, radios, and pundits. It screams at our eyes from billboards, magazine covers, websites, newspapers, and (most insidiously) from each other as we enact the terrible rituals of our culture that condemn deviation and exalt the synthetic common.

Art is the answer to our social sickness. Instead of weakness, it provides will. Instead of consumption it is authentic creation. I am an artist because this wondrous discipline serves my needs of investigation and subversion. Art is the chance to reclaim our status as agents of change and cultural advancement. The capacity to influence society is built into each of us because we have the capacity *to imagine society differently*. We are all artists, and it is only dulled sensation that makes us forget it. This is wonder, and it is wonderful. Art is the social mutation that will save us all.

Move

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

–Rabinadrath Tagore, excerpt from *The Stream of Life*

Everything is in motion. The cosmic dance is complex and tiered. Like a sacred, animate mandala the universe whirls ceaselessly at all levels. At the smallest scale, we know of the quantum foam, a constant subatomic jitter in the basement of reality. Just above that electrons flitter in clouds and waves of probability. Atoms bind and break, coalescing into momentary patterns of organized activity before dispersing. Microbes squirm and thrash chaotically. The human form, and other macroscopic structures like it, can twist, bend, and extend. Earth rotates not only on its axis but around a star, and that planet-star complex in turns rotates around the glowing central hub of a galaxy. Larger still, that galaxy, the Milky Way, travels through the universe in coordination with countless other galaxies in what is called a galactic supercluster. And now we have theories of even larger structures called simply galactic filaments, incomprehensibly colossal strands of superclusters drifting through a universe whose very fabric is expanding in all directions. Everything is in motion.

This ubiquity of movement drew me towards the work in *The Sacred Body*. Each of these pieces represents an exercise in discovery. Conceptually and physically I aim to unearth the most basic movement possible and then transform that movement into a meditative act. It is a way to pray with the body, bypassing the artificial constructions of language. The most authentic truths cannot be put into words effectively: the nature of Love; the quality of need; the glory of existing; the commonality underpinning human life; tranquility, and assuredly others which I have not had the opportunity to experience. To communicate anything sincere about these truths necessitates an abandonment of anything so ambiguous and slippery as the word. And of course what is the image but the visual sister to language? Yves Klein has been a major influence on me generally as an artist and especially so in this body of work. Klein was a French proto-conceptualist of the 1960's, attributed by some with the revival of the avant-garde (Brougher 20). Klein pursued a grandiose metaphysic in his work, one which translated into a personal and social revolution. He called this his "Blue Revolution" (Brougher 273). He intended nothing less than to transform society into a beautiful utopia, starting with the entirety of France.

His paintings for which he achieved the greatest notoriety were glorious monochromes in his signature IKB (International Klein Blue) pigment (Stewart 2011). He also executed a series of *Anthropometries* in which models would cover their bodies in brilliantly blue paint and apply themselves to canvases as living brushes (Yves Klein Archives). Through the interaction of body and material he achieved his art, and his art ended as soon as the body stepped away from the process. What is compelling is that his work, despite involving so much more than an object, still needs that object as an anchor. His goal was to

imbue the viewer with “immaterial sensibility” (Brougher 47). To achieve that sensibility, that transcendent understanding, it needed to be grounded in the physical.

I see my work as a refinement of some of Klein’s ideas. The main issue I take with him is that he saw the universe as fundamentally static. His monochromes depicted a blue infinity behind consciousness. However, I firmly believe the universe is ultimately dynamic. Everything moves. His glorious color monochromes ran heinously close to fetishization of a color instead of comprehending the infinity behind that color, restlessly clanging away in the depths. Much like him, I see the capacity for social evolution as resting in art. The production and control of media culture is ultimately the production and control of society as a whole.

One issue that arises in choosing a movement is this: what kind of movement do I use? The body is capable of myriad variations in its motility. The body can be soft or jerky, fast, slow, spastic, controlled, rhythmic, or still. Its movements can be as small as the extension of a digit and as large as sweep of the spine or the gait of the legs. However, for my purposes I have found it necessary to strip away these options, much as I have already stripped away the variability in materials. If my aim is to dig down to the utter foundation of myself, the universe, and everything in between, the motions I choose must also be foundational. Therefore, the actions I have used thus far are defined by their controllability, their repeatability, and their simplicity.

To utilize the most simplistic gestures possible is the logical extrapolation of the simplicity of the universal motion I am referencing. That motion is oscillatory. Akin to an engine humming away, the universe thrums as well, reverberating on a scale grander than humans can perceive. Miraculously, we are capable of executing that same motion on the scale of the body. With the advance of technology and our understanding of the universe it is clear that scale is merely a distraction from the unity of existence.

For example, some of the smallest objects we have studied are capable of producing awesome amounts of energy, such as the splitting atom. Between the four forces of the universe — gravity, electromagnetic, strong, and weak — gravity, the force that operates at the largest scale, is the weakest. The black hole represents infinite gravitational pull and density concentrated in an infinitesimally small area of space. Scale is superficial. Repeatability is key.

It is this repeatability that is the crux of my art process. These pieces stay away from actions that are so spontaneous that they cannot be reproduced. To move with the universe one must be constantly moving. Furthermore, the form of that movement must not vary. The only variations that occur in movements of the natural, that is to say, *that which does not possess self-willed motility*, occur as the inevitable consequence of interaction with other forces. Galaxies intersect, and asteroids collide. The motion of the body therefore must be at least as constant as these things, for the inevitability of fatigue will induce variation regardless. Hence, the controllability of the action must be considered. I drew from disciplines that focus on controlled, extended movement such as butoh, a Japanese dance style whose aim was to obtain authentic movement of the body

(Tangentz 2011). It broke with the traditional conventions of dance, focusing on the expressive power of the body and stillness. Its movements are slow and controlled in the extreme. Through the gestures I am using I seek a similar authenticity in my actions. Divorced from the codified motions and positioning given by society my frame is free to act in accordance with its design.

For example, $3=2$ represents one of my larger experiments in gesture. The material components are three strips of paper. Each strip is nine feet tall and two feet wide. They are installed so that there is a gap of two feet between each piece of paper. On each of these pieces of paper I have repeated a single stroke extending from the top to the bottom of each paper with a mop. The locations of these strokes are defined by both vertical edges of the sheets and their centers. The duration for each instance of the repeated stroke was thirty-five minutes. Since the work contains nine instances of the action, the piece in its entirety represents 315 minutes of repetitious motion.

Part of developing this body of work necessitates exploring the extremes of human motion. The smallest of extensions are as important as the arcs drawn from leg to spine to arm. Therefore, I pursued the absolute height of my bodily range. The form and title of $3=2$ reference meditation. The title is inspired by the koan, a seemingly nonsensical statement or phrase invoked as a means of transcending the constraints of logical thought. It highlights the assumptions that filter the reception of the work; while there are indeed three pieces of paper, together they generate two spaces defined by their edges. Additionally, within each piece of paper I have repeated this idea through the gestures. The distortion of the paper creates three abraded stripes with two smooth peaks between them.

Finally, the title concisely states one of the realizations I have had while working through this project. Each piece I have created is tripartite. They are three references coming together: me, the materials, and the wall. They are as much a record of where they were made as how they were made. At such a large scale I allow the viewer to step into my meditative space, the work completely filling their vision depending upon their physical proximity to the paper. The significance of the exercise is to willfully align the self with the universal and thereby bypass the constraints of a drugged and apathetic society. In choosing an action that is willful instead of merely reflexive or instinctive I unify the body and the mental state, aligning both with that which is transcendent to the social: the cosmic. Together, all of these pieces constitute the beginning of a catalogue of my bodily and mental parameters.

Wash

If one leaves the material as it is, presenting it just as material, then it starts to tell us something and speak with a mighty voice. Keeping the life of the material alive also bringing the spirit alive, and lifting up the spirit means leading the material up to the height of the spirit.

—Jiro Yoshihara, excerpt from *The Gutai Manifesto*

The union of the material and mystical is the key to understanding these pieces. I am creating spaces where matter is imbued with the transcendent. In juxtaposing the two I participate in a meditative ritual through which I too am saturated with the transcendent. Here it is crucial to understand that I do not mean to suggest that I am alone in my ability to do this, or that I have a special access to some esoteric process. I am doing nothing beyond the means of anyone else. The grace that comes from this constitutes a realignment of the self. I want anyone to be able to make this art. More accurately, I want anyone to be able to realize *that they can make this art*, and that it is full of the same power as any other work. Align the mind with the body, align the body with the universal, and experience truth. Just as fleeting as the actions that produced the paper objects, that realignment is the purest form of the art I am making in *The Sacred Body*.

After Klein I came to find out about Robert Ryman and the Gutai group. Robert Ryman, a self-proclaimed realist painter, also works predominantly in monochromes, settling on white as the dominant color. His pieces reflect a constant experimentation with materials, combining various kinds of paints, varnishes and drawing implements on numerous substrates. His work explores the relationship between the art object and the space it inhabits. His art belies no greater conceptual aims other than to explore the media itself and its own virtues (Paradox 2007).

Although Ryman's aims are different from mine, I see a clear relationship between his interaction with contextual space and my work. The abrasion that degrades the paper forces the viewer of my work to engage with the wall behind the work. The construction of the work also calls these typically unconsidered elements into question. By stripping away everything but my action, I force the piece to interact with its environment. It *must* respond to the wall to which I've attached it, or the floor that supports it while I move. It is true to the conditions of its making.

In this I also see a connection to the Gutai group. Born out of Japan's post-WWII culture, the Gutai group fought against the prevailing social constraints of Japan, striving for an authenticity of form and material. Jiro Yoshihara writes in the Gutai Manifesto, "...lifting up the spirit means leading the material up to the height of the spirit" (Yoshihara 2011). I too seek this authenticity and this union of material and spirit. I make the paper speak psalms in the language of its movement and memory. Each crease, wrinkle,

tear, degradation, pulping, roll, warp, bend, and hole give the paper a voice, as Yoshihari puts it a “mighty voice,” and that voice speaks of motion. Like the Gutai group, I see the honesty in destruction.

In a sense I am synthesizing the project of the Gutai group and butoh. I am erasing the line between object and action. I have heard my work described as paintings, drawings, performances, events, and “trans-paintings” (Anderson 2011). The best phrase I have arrived at myself to describe these pieces so far is “painterly actions.” Regardless of the nomenclature, I have taken the aims of authentic movement from butoh and wedded it to the sincerity of materials as expressed by the Gutai group.

Like Klein, I am extrapolating ideas predicated in Buddhism (Zone 2011). I am reaching towards the fundamental monism of reality. Through the assumption of the sacred we circumvent the chains of the social. For inspiration in my process I refer to various religious traditions and their acts of ablution, their rituals, their cleansing procedures, and the holiness that follows. However, I do not cleanse myself for some deity or some leader. The purifying act is a catalyst for the ascendancy of the self, an act of which I feel all people are capable. This is not dissimilar from meditation traditions, wherein enlightenment is achieved through the draining of self and the cleansing of the body. The most dramatic of these is *misogi*, a purification practice which entails standing under a waterfall to enter a meditative state (Misogi 2011).

Additionally I am thinking of existentialist philosophy, of Sartre and Nietzsche. Sartre places the responsibility for the condition of existence upon the individual (Flynn 2011). Our lives will be what we make of them. Nietzsche glorifies the raw, primal strength of humanity (Wicks 2011). We can reclaim a natural state of existing by disengaging with our over-developed rational elements. They both engage the idea of self-actualization. I see no difference in my work. By generating the pure unity of mind and body as conveyed by my motion, my borders expand to the cosmic. In defiance of the self-effacing paradigm of our society, I have the audacity to place in my being the fullest gravity of existence.

Birth

This is the account of how all was in suspense, all calm, in silence; all motionless, quiet, and empty was the expanse of the sky.

—excerpt from part one of the *Popol Vuh*

I believe that art is play. I believe that art is serious. Those things with the greatest gravity can also be the most joyful. I do not see a disconnect between the weight behind a piece of art and the playfulness that can be experienced through it. That lightness is essential to the transformation. In these pieces I negotiate the extremes of play and seriousness. The ideas and questions that fuel my work predicate on the most basic human truths, and I intentionally marry the extrapolation of those truths with gesture and movement. I want to be a baby again, rolling around in the factuality of my existence without concerns or indignities. To be serious is not to be grave; art is paradoxically heavy and light.

Paradox is one of the prime movers of our existence. It grunts and heaves its way in between what we previously thought to be a slick union of mind and experience. My work engages both the intellect and the intuitive self. I see both halves of human consciousness as equal and vital. The emotional, intuitive response is not merely an action built out of gut instinct. Rather, that primal evocation of the body and sensation is just as powerful and insightful as the intellectualizing that follows. The wisdom of the materials is integral to my behavior as an artist. This is the essence of creativity: the paradoxical interplay between genesis and revelation. Syzygy is another word that I feel is appropriate. While syzygy has a few meanings, the definition of interest to me is this: *the union of opposites* (Syzygy 2011). The syzygy of the rational and the non-rational is the catalyst for art as a vital component of human experience. In this way *The Sacred Body* represents a starting point. Previous artists who aimed for art in its ultimate expression came to dead ends. Ad Reinhardt's work culminated in black monochromes with grids of slight variations. Malevich constructed a white square tilted upon another white square and abandoned painting. Abstract Expressionism fenced itself into an aesthetic corner with its attempts at transcendent expression. For each of them purity of form was seen as the ending point or culmination of the art-making process. In contrast, I see the purity I have been striving for as a beginning to that process. It is a methodology for generating a way of interacting with the world that synthesizes the seeming opposition of intuition and reason. The painterly actions are the seed from which I can grow my artistic practice, and fortunately I have several avenues to explore in evolving the water actions.

For example, *Four Rhythms* represents the second phase in the evolution of this art process. The work consists of four squares of black paper arranged in the format of a larger square. Each square of black paper carries a unique mark that has been repeated for a duration of twenty minutes. Together this equals

eighty minutes of activity for the artwork. The substance applied to the paper with this as well as the other actions on black paper is bleach.

It has been one my goals to dig down to the bare essence of artistic activity in *The Sacred Body*. I achieved this through the white pieces. Now, in the black pieces, I begin the process of rebuilding that artistic practice, grounding it in the purest foundation I have been able to find. The black pieces mark the reintroduction of more visually oriented content into the work. The gestures have expanded in their complexity.

However, as *Four Rhythms* illustrates, the original premises for my actions are retained. The use of bleach is a permutation of my ideas about ablution. I am quite literally washing away the former state of the black paper, this time with a much clearer visual result. The importance of meditative action is still central to the art. Repeated gesture is the action that generates the final state of each piece of paper. What is of interest to me is the ways in which my original investigations can evolve. Instead of washing being an additive act (the addition of texture and decay), it becomes a subtraction. In this piece it is the subtraction of color. The pieces can demonstrate complex motion, and multiple types of complex motion, in the same space.

The source of inspiration for *Four Rhythms* is the calligraphic line. It plays with the relationship between action and the codified delivery of language. I have been inspired by the practice of asemic writing in much of my work. Asemic writing is the practice of generating text without specific textual information (Gaze 2011). It abandons previous conventions and standards for generating semantic content to allow for an a-linguistic approach to finding meaning in the text.

Again, I am stripping action of previous connotations and human-constructed attempts at generating denotation. By ripping away the trappings of image or content the action itself becomes the source of understanding in this piece. In the use of asemic writing I prefer to start with an automatic process. I try to avoid having a specific content or narrative to guide my movement. The personal associations I make with *Four Rhythms* revolve around natural cycles and traditional mystical symbolism. I see connections between astrological notation and pictograms. The power of asemic writing is that by its nature it instigates a schism between our innate tendency to generate context and content before experiencing writing and the reception of the writing itself.

Four Rhythms in no way exhausts the options presented by this project. What happens when I start to use different materials in combination with the same process? What happens to the paper as I begin stacking it in layers? At what point does it become more sculpture than flat object? What if I rolled the papers and presented them standing on the floor? What if the pieces were installed in places other than a gallery setting? I am yet to fully explore all of the possible movements of the body. My hope is that by reclaiming the body and the individual as a free agent I can begin the process of waking up for myself and those around me.

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